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Ashes to Dust

by [Falco276](#)

Summary

Zexion is being horribly abused by his father and after moving several times because of his "witchcraft" and having almost everything in his life go horribly wrong, he thinks suicide is the only answer. Based on the true story of myself and a personal friend.

Notes

Originally written by Levana Lechraminare from ff.net.
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Thanks again and enjoy.
(This fic will stay on Ao3 until deleted on March 20, 2014.)

This work was inspired by [Ashes To Dust](#) by levana Lachminare, [Ashes To Dust](#) by Levana Lachminare

Chapter 1

"I stole my father's gun and by the time you read this, I will be long dead.

I can't explain why I am the way I am, or why a father can't love his son unconditionally. I just can't do this anymore. Life... is so painful. My father, the bullies at school, everyone who's ever come in contact with me... they all aim to shut me out or shut me up. With the exception of a select few, everyone I've ever met has either hated or feared me. I give up. You can all move on with your lives and pretend I never existed. I won't be an embarrassment or a burden to you any longer. Dad, I hope you can find peace in the fact that you won't have a sinner for a son any longer. If there is a next life, I hope it is better than this one, and if I end up in hell, Dad, I'll see you there.

Demyx, I'm sorry. You're the only person in this world I cared about, and you're the only one who kept me going this long. You're the one bright light in a very dark place and I thank you for being there as long as you have. Know that I love you, and I hope you find someone who can make you truly happy.

-Zexion

P.S. To whoever finds me, the things I have with my body, the photographs and recordings... give it all to the police. I've been collecting them for years and it's time something be done about it. My final wish is for my father to rot behind bars."

I looked down at the note in my hands, rereading it for the umpteenth time before taking a safety pin and attaching it securely to my shirt. Everything was falling into place now. I'd said my goodbyes to the only person who mattered and I was ready to go. Finally, I would get the peace I'd wanted all my life.

I looked down at the revolver I held in my hands, all set, fully loaded, and ready to fire. This was it. This was the end. I took a deep breath and smiled as I put the gun against my temple. Goodbye... Demyx.

Six Months Earlier:

"No, Dad!" I screamed as my father, who was nearly twice my size, picked me up and flung me over his shoulder. I pounded my fists against his back and kicked my legs, struggling to free myself from his grasp. "Please don't do this again!"

"Shut up, you little witch," came the curt response as I was suddenly plunged into the freezing cold water in the bathtub. "It's time to cleanse these demons, boy."

"Plea-" My cry was cut short as he put his hands around my throat and forced my head under the water. I clawed at his hands, but his grip was so strong. All I could do was wait for him to stop.

"Repent, boy," he said as he lifted my writhing form from the water. "Ask the Lord for forgiveness and repent your sinful ways."

"I haven't done anything wro-" I tried to say before he forced my head under the water yet again. I wasn't a witch. How could I ask forgiveness for something I hadn't done... for something I wasn't sorry for?

"Repent!" he shouted as he brought me up coughing and sputtering. "Last chance."

"Dad, please!" I cried, kicking and trying to wriggle free.

"The demons hold you strong," he breathed as he pushed me beneath the surface of the water one last time.

As always, I held my breath until my lungs burned, still clinging to a hope that my father would come to his senses and pull me up. However, as always, he held me under until the bubbles stopped rising, until the last of my air was gone and my body forced me to take a breath of whatever was available. The water entered my lungs in a painful rush, my voice failing me as I tried to scream. Maybe this time would be the last time. Maybe this time, I would finally be freed from this life. *This is it*, I thought. *After all this time, this is finally going to be the end of me*. I smiled at the thought as the world around me grew dark.

I felt like I was flying, like I was soaring higher than anyone could reach me. In an instant I was gone, my eyes closing in death. But of course... he wouldn't let it keep me for long.

The pressure of his hands on my chest was the first thing I felt before I expelled the water from my lungs and took the first good breath of air I'd had in several minutes. I wondered briefly exactly how long he'd let me stay dead this time before looking up to see him standing over me with a Bible in one hand and a golden cross in the other.

"Be sober," he began to read as he extended his cross toward me, "be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." He flipped to a page with a post-it note sticking out of it and said, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

"I'm not a witch," I croaked, my voice hoarse and quiet.

"There, there, son," he said, looking down on me with a small smile. "We'll let the Lord take care of it."

He turned around and left the room without another word, leaving me cold, wet, and shivering on the bathroom floor.

A/N: This story is very personal for me because it's sort of a mesh between the real events that happened to a dear friend of mine and events in my own life. It's a heart-wrenching story of physical and emotional abuse and everything that happens is, for the most part, very real. I plan to spice up the "witchcraft" to fit Zexion and more of a fictional setting and put in a few personal touches here and there, but other than that this is exactly the monster that my friend and I had to face every day. Religious fanaticism can be a very powerful force, and a very brutal and unforgiving thing.

I don't know how often I will be updating this one, because I'm also working on two more of my own creation, and there's also the fact that writing this has me in tears most of the time. Expect more, but I can't really say when. Thank you for reading and for anyone out there who is suffering from any kind of abuse for any reason, remember that there are always people out there who love you and care about you and it does get better. I am a living example that it does get better.

Chapter 2

"He tried to drown me again last night," I said into the still air of my bedroom. As usual, I had awakened before dawn, but this time it was different. This time, I had awakened to the sensation of hands on my chest and nails tearing at my throat. It wasn't real, but of course they never are. That's what I tell myself.

It was the move, the unfamiliar place that prompted my rude awakening, nothing more. The uneasiness I felt was caused by the fear of going to a new school. I knew it would be the same as everywhere else. I would be the popular new student that everyone wanted to get to know at first. Then people would realize I was just a freak. The popular kids would shun me first, then everyone else would follow suit. Of course, there would be those few kind hearted people who would try to be nice to me out of pity. Those... I would shut out. I didn't want or need anyone's pity. Besides, if anyone were caught talking to the freak, it would ruin their reputation forever.

I rolled over, looking at the fading bruises on my wrists in the faint morning light that was now streaming into the window. Those bruises were more than a week old now, but they were still very visible. I knew I had fresh bruises on my neck. I didn't need to see a mirror to know they were there. Those wouldn't be something a simple collar could hide. I would have to wear a turtleneck today.

My black and light blue striped one would go great with my headphones, which would be a must in the crowded high school halls. Horizontal stripes would also hide the fact that I was way too skinny. That was the only reason I really wore stripes. One tends to lose a lot of weight when being denied food unless agreeing to pray at mealtime and repent for one's imaginary sins. Usually, the only meals I got were the free ones at school, but with the move and all... I hadn't eaten in over three days.

"Really looking forward to breakfast this morning," I said aloud in the general direction of my wall. Usually, the walls didn't talk back. Usually. Did I mention I was a freak? Yeah.

As the sun began to rise, so did I, taking the initiative to get ready before my father came to officially wake me up. I flipped on the light and undressed, tossing my pajamas toward the far corner. I glanced at myself in the full-length mirror on my closet door before sliding the door open. I didn't like to see myself naked. There were too many visible ribs and too many scars, half of them self-inflicted. I dressed in loose black jeans that had become so baggy around my waist that they had to be held up solely by a dark blue belt. The bottom hems of the legs were ragged and torn from walking on them. My aforementioned turtleneck went on next and steel-toed combat boots went on last, so people wouldn't step on my toes. Then I grabbed my headphones and hung them around my neck while feeding the wire under my shirt and tucking my iPod into my pocket.

Just as I'd done everything that could be done in my room, including gathering my messenger bag full of school books, my father came upstairs to unlock my door, letting me out of my personal prison for the day.

"Already dressed?" he asked, eyeing my clothes with disdain.

"All I need to do is brush my teeth and I'll be off," I answered without looking him in the eye.

He grunted, letting me into the bathroom that, from the smell, I'd guess he just got finished cleaning.

When I was done brushing my teeth, he stopped me, gesturing to my headphones and saying, "I

don't like you bringing that to school, Zexion."

"Would you rather me not shut it out?" I asked, scrunching my eyebrows.

"I'd rather you let go of those demons," he sneered.

There are no demons, Dad, I wanted to say. *You're delusional.* Instead, I said, "I can't."

"Right," he said, crossing his arms. "Just remember that people don't take kindly to witches for long. If I hear of anything... adverse happening, you're in for it. Don't do anything stupid and try not to ruin anyone's day."

I took a deep breath without saying anything before heading to school. We only lived a few blocks away from Fair Hart High School, so it was easily within walking distance. I preferred to walk alone rather than ride the bus on any occasion. Crowds were... uncomfortable for me.

I arrived well before most of the busses did with plenty of time to spare for breakfast. I walked right past the group of four boys and a girl that were already standing around the bus line and headed toward the cafeteria (I'd studied the map before coming to school, so I already knew where everything was). However, before I could make it even a few feet past them, one of the boys stopped me.

"Hey, new kid," he said, pulling on my messenger bag. The bag slid off my shoulder and fell to the ground, spilling its contents onto the cement. When the boy saw two books (a Japanese manga and a work of Shakespeare) fall out of my bag along with my school books, he commented, "So we got ourselves a reader. I bet you're the smart one too. Mind letting me pay you to do my homework?"

"You'll never learn anything that way," I said quietly as I shoved my things back into my bag.

"Who says I want to learn," he laughed. "Come on. Ten bucks per paper. You get me an A and I'll bump it up to fifteen."

"No thanks," I said, backing away from the group.

"Suit yourself," he said with a shrug. "I can always get another brain to do it, but you just missed an opportunity."

"I'll pass," I said, giving the group a wave before making my way into the cafeteria.

I could feel my stomach growling, begging for food, and I couldn't get through the line fast enough, even though there was no one in front of me. However, when I got to the register to pay, I hit a small snag.

"You're new here, right?" the woman who worked at the register asked. "You got your lunch number yet?"

"Ah..." I said slowly. "No."

"You filled out your paperwork?" she asked, fiddling with the touch screen on her computer.

"It was supposed to be transferred," I said, looking hungrily down at the food that was within my reach. "I came from Radiant Garden, from Hollow Bastian High School. I'm supposed to get free meals."

"What's your name, Sweetie?" she asked, her hand poised over the screen.

"Zexion Corazza," I said, spelling out the difficult name for her.

"Ah... huh," she said, biting her cheek. "Here you are. Corazza. Your number's 3044, hun."

"Thanks," I said with a grin, taking my food to the nearest table to eat. I tried to actually taste the food as I all but shoved it down my throat, but I was so hungry all I wanted was to get it to my stomach as fast as possible. This wasn't the longest I've gone without food. During our previous move we were on the road for well over a week. In that time, we always stopped at fast food drive through windows and my father would always order food for me, but he would throw the whole meal away if I still refused to repent. I didn't get any food that week.

During the summer and winter vacations, I would resort to going to homeless shelters a few times a week because I knew couldn't go without food for three months. Everyone there knew me, and most of them came to find out that I wasn't actually homeless. The woman who owned the place started asking me questions and ended up trying to file a police report for child abuse. When my father got wind of that, he was not happy. To make a long story short, we ended up moving here.

"Hey, new kid," said a tall redheaded boy as I saw him sit across from me out of the corner of my eye. "Golly, you sure have an appetite don't you?"

I glanced up at him and the small blonde boy that was standing with his arms on the redhead's shoulders. The first things I noticed about the redhead were his big green eyes and the strange purple upside-down teardrop shaped tattoos just below them.

"The name's Axel," he said with a smile as he thrust his hand toward me. "Got it memorized?"

I nodded as I shook his hand. The touch shocked me in two ways. Through his touch, I could tell that he wanted to be sincere toward me, which was something not many people strived for, and from the feeling I got from him, I knew exactly who the blonde boy was who was so affectionately leaning on him.

"This here's my boyfriend Roxas," he said with a smile, beaming up at the other boy. "Now, I get a lot of hell for that from a few people here," he said with a serious note. "You're not going to be one of those ignorant homophobes are you? Cuz I'd hate to have to do something about that. You seem like a nice guy."

I shook my head as I swallowed the last of my food and smiled for the first time in a long time. This must have been something of a blessing and despite my general pessimistic attitude, I was now hopeful that maybe... just maybe... this school experience wouldn't be as bad as my last.

"No," I said with a small chuckle. "I'm definitely not a homophobe."

Axel smiled, tilting his head and was about to say something when he was interrupted by the first boy I'd come into contact with here.

"Hey, new kid," he said, coming to stand behind the couple I'd just met. I saw Roxas visibly shrink, sitting down and sort of hiding his face in Axel's arm. "Let me give you a word of advice. If you want to get anywhere in here, don't go hanging around the fags."

"Wanna say that to my face, Seifer?" Axel said, standing up to face the boy while still shielding Roxas.

"Yeah," said the boy who I now knew to be Seifer as he came so close to Axel he was almost chest to chest with him. "You and your brownnoser bitch over there need to stay away from the new blood. Wouldn't want him to catch whatever disease you fags are carrying."

Axel looked like he was going to explode, but before he said anything, I stood up, slamming my fists onto the table and shouted, "You need to shut the fuck up and stop telling people what they can and can't do!"

I wasn't a confrontational person, not at all, at least not normally. This was part of the reason I didn't like touching people I didn't know. I always tended to pick up on things that the other person may not want anyone else to know or pick up emotional tendencies of the other person. This time, both of the two happened. I'd felt both the overwhelming love Axel had for Roxas, and the hot temper he had when provoked. Those words were not mine, not by a long shot.

"What the hell did you say to me, new blood?" he asked, now stepping around the table to face me.

Normally, if this happened, I would have shut myself off and backed out, but I had Axel's heated temper coursing through me, so I didn't back down the way I would have... the way I should have.

"You heard me, you overconfident bastard," I spat. "There's nothing wrong with love, or who one chooses to share it with. If you can't see that, you're just an ignorant fool with your head shoved too far up your ass to see the truth."

"Big mistake," he said, shaking his head. The next thing I knew, his fist was coming at me full swing.

By this time, the lady working at the cafeteria register realized something was going on and stopped the fight before it got out of hand. I ended up with a sore jaw, but other than that, nothing happened. As soon as Seifer's fist made contact with my face, the physical contact snapped me out of Axel's temperament and made me aware of the overly competitive home environment Seifer had to deal with growing up. It didn't make me dislike him any less, but I knew why he'd become the person he was now. Thankfully, I didn't pick up any of his personality traits through the touch.

Gosh, I was a really fucked up person. Ever since I was born, this sort of thing had been happening. I should have known not to shake Axel's hand. I've spent almost my entire life avoiding physical contact with everyone. It was strange, and I didn't know how I did it. It just happened, just like everything else. It just... happened. Physical touch was always uncomfortable or even sometimes painful for me. I didn't want to glean the things that I did about the other person because personal things should remain so and I didn't want their personality to overshadow mine for however short a time it did. I didn't feel like myself after it happened.

"Starting fights on your first day, Mr. Corazza?" asked the cafeteria lady as she pulled me off the floor, thankfully not touching my skin. "Both of you, report to the principal's office."

"Wait," Roxas said, coming out from behind Axel and saying the first thing I've heard from him. "He didn't start it. He was standing up for us and Seifer slugged him."

"Well I didn't see it," she said, "so if you want to go with them and report something, feel free."

"We will at that," Axel said, taking his boyfriend's hand as he gave me a light, friendly punch on the shoulder. "Come on, you," he said to me. "We gotta get you outta trouble."

"My name's Zexion," I said, my voice meek after Axel's fiery temper left me.

"There's the name," he said with a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Zexion."

"Thanks," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.

Today was probably going to be a very long and emotionally draining day, but at least I was away from home, where I would be shoved and locked back in my room until my father came up to get me for "dinner." I tried not to think about it as the four of us made our way to the office to see the principal.

A/N: I'm still working on tweaking this whole "witchcraft" sort of psychic thing Zexion's got going on. I may incorporate illusions later on, but like I said I'm still working on it. I hope it turns out alright. Thank you for your support. Thank you for reading, and please review.

Chapter 3

A/N: I should have put this at the beginning of chapter 1, but it completely slipped my mind. If anyone is feeling suicidal, please seek immediate help. In the US (and I think Canada) please call the toll free National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. In the UK and Ireland, contact the Samaritans at 08457 90 90 90 (UK) and 1850 60 90 90 (ROI) (call charges apply).

I'm sorry that I don't have the numbers for any other countries. Also, if anyone simply needs someone nonjudgmental to talk to, my inbox is open to you.

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I came to find out that Axel had frequent trips to the principal's office, mostly for being involved with fights that he may or may not have started. He was almost on a first name basis with Leon Hart, the principal whose family founded Fair Hart High School. He talked our way (or rather my way) out of trouble and a combination of his and Roxas' testimony ended up getting Seifer suspended for three days.

After Seifer stormed off, Axel and Roxas shared a quick high-five before Axel nudged me in the side and said, "Way to go, Zexion. Way to show that creeper who's boss. I wouldn't have thought you'd have it in you!"

"I don't really..." I said, hanging my head.

"Aw, don't go gettin' all shy on us now," he said as the bell rang for us to go to our first class. "Well, see ya later!" He waved as he and Roxas left the office hand-in-hand.

I sighed, adjusting my messenger bag as I left the office without really looking where I was going. I ended up running straight into a dirty blonde boy with a messy mullet. I tripped and fell flat on my face, my books spilling out of my bag for the second time in one day.

"Geez," he said as I saw him fidgeting out of the corner of my eye. "Sorry. Here, let me help you."

Before I could protest, he was down on his hands and knees, helping me pick up my books. I was careful not to touch him, but despite my best efforts, my fingers brushed his as I took my books from him. I winced at first, fearing what would come through, but then I stopped and just... stared. His heart was pure and free of any stain. This was a person who had never been truly hurt in his life. That wasn't what made me stop, though. What really shocked me was something that had never happened before. In that brief moment our skin was touching... I saw myself with him in my mind. I saw myself talking to him and I kind of looked somber. I began to run away from him when he grabbed my arm, pulled me back toward him and wrapped his arms around me.

When the contact ceased, the scene melted away. We both stopped and remained completely still for several moments, just staring at one another. I looked at him and he looked at me and I don't know how it happened, but we just... clicked.

"What..." I whispered, not really comprehending what had just happened.

"Hey..." he said in kind of a breathy whisper. "You okay?"

"Boys," someone said from the office as the hallway began to clear, "you're going to be late for class."

"Class!" he exclaimed, looking to me and asking, "Do you know where Mr. Stein's class is?"

"I think that's actually my first class too," I said with a nervous laugh. "It's down that way." I pointed to a classroom on the end of first hallway.

"Okay," he said with a smile, getting up and holding his hand out to me. "Come on."

I was reluctant to touch him again, but I took his hand and allowed him to help me up. The feeling I got from him was mesmerizing. I felt like I was picking up a piece of his very soul. Normally, I would have pulled away from such deep contact, but he was... different somehow. There was just something about him that I couldn't put my finger on. It made me want to be closer to him and I was actually more reluctant to let go of his hand and lose that feeling than I had been to touch him to begin with.

"We'll talk later," he said as we rushed to class, entering the room just before the tardy bell rang.

"Well, class," said Mr. Stein as he closed the door behind us. "This is something you don't see every day. We have *two* new students with us today. Boys, if you'd like to introduce yourselves."

"Ah..." I began, but the other boy beat me to the punch.

"I'm Demyx O'Donohue. I'm seventeen and I'm somewhat of a musical genius from what I'm told. I can play pretty much any string instrument you set in front of me from a violin to a zither, but I'm best at the sitar, guitar, and bass."

"That's very good, Demyx," said the teacher. "I'm sure Ms. Bates would love to have you in her music class."

He beamed and I stepped forward, uncomfortable with the way everyone was looking at me. "I'm Zexion Corazza. There's... nothing really special about me. I'm seventeen and I enjoy literature. That's... basically it."

"Hmm..." he said as he pointed to two unoccupied desks at the back corner of the class. "You can sit over there, then. It's the only place we have empty."

I nodded and Demyx smiled as we made our way to the back of the class. Demyx was waving to everyone as he passed them and I smiled at this. When we reached our desks, I sat with my head propped on my elbow while he sat with his legs crossed and his hands behind his head. It was hard not to watch him and I didn't know any plausible reason I would have to stare. I was just... curious about him.

"Psst," I heard him hiss from beside me. I snapped my head up, coming out of my thoughts to actually look up at him. He flicked a small triangle of paper off of his desk which then landed neatly in my lap.

I blinked a few more times before unfolding the paper. It read, "*Wanna hang out after school?*"

I began to simply shake my head, but then I realized that he would most likely think that meant I didn't want to and figured he deserved an explanation, so I wrote, "*I can't leave the house. Sorry.*"

I handed him the note which he read and responded, "*Grounded or something?*"

I stiffened and took a deep breath as I wrote, "*Something like that.*"

He scribbled something down and handed it to me, "*How bout this: Join the art club. I'm already in and it has an after school meeting tomorrow. You can say you stayed for school.*"

"*I'll have to ask,*" I wrote. I hesitated before writing, "*My father's pretty strict.*"

He pouted as he read the note, scribbling something in response. He was about to pass it to me when Mr. Stein caught us and said, "No passing notes back there. I'll give you a warning this time, but the next time I catch you, I'll have you stand up and read it to the class."

I felt my cheeks flush as I meekly muttered, "Sorry."

"Pay attention, boys," he said as he turned his back to us.

Mr. Stein went into lecturing and for the first time in my life, I could not tell you what the teacher was talking about. My mind was racing and my thoughts were everywhere but here. I wanted to know if my vision had any weight to it. I never considered myself clairvoyant. I'd never had dreams about the future nor had I ever experienced any sort of future sight aside from being able to tell who was coming into a room before they did. It was bizarre.

After class, Demyx asked me if he could sit with me at lunch and all I could do was nod. As always when you're waiting for something, time passed so slowly until eleven. The boring plethora of information I'd taught myself years ago went in one ear as I answered a few questions, then went straight out the other. I couldn't concentrate on anything for any large amount of time and though I got my work done, I wasn't really paying it much attention, which wasn't like me at all. Usually, I gave every assignment my all and always paid attention in class, writing detailed notes and making the highest scores of anyone else in my classes. Today, I just couldn't keep my mind from wandering.

Lunch time finally came around and I was one of the first people in the cafeteria again, mostly due to my fourth period class being the closest classroom to the cafeteria doors. I went through the line and was amazed at the choices we had to make. At HBHS we only had one option, which was usually not very good, but here we had our choice of three different foods for each type and we also had a salad bar. I blinked a few times before choosing pizza, making myself a salad and going to the register. After receiving my food, I sat at the same table I'd sat at this morning at breakfast and waited for Demyx to arrive.

By the time he sat next to me, I'd almost finished my meal.

"Wow," he said with a small chuckle. "Hungry, are you?"

I let out a nervous laugh as the blonde sat mere inches away from me. If he were anyone else, I would have been very uncomfortable, but since it was him I actually had to stop myself from leaning into him. Who was this guy and why was he making me feel this way?

"So... you're Zexion," he said, running a hand through his hair.

I nodded and said, "And you're Demyx?"

He smiled and said, "Everyone has something special about them."

"Excuse me?" I asked, puzzled.

"In class this morning," he said, looking down. "You said there was nothing really special about you. That can't be true."

"It is," I said as I finished up the last of my food.

"Don't say that," he said with a frown. Immediately, he perked up and said, "I want you to tell me one good thing about yourself right now. Come on!"

I thought for a moment before saying, "There's nothing."

"Not one single thing?" he asked. When I shook my head he said, "You've got some self-esteem issues, don't you? Okay, I'll start. I'm good at music. Now it's your turn. One good thing."

I sighed, not wanting to disappoint him, and said, "I'm... intelligent."

"There you go!" he said with a big smile. "You see?"

"But no one really values intelligence anymore," I said as I glanced up at him. As soon as I met his big cyan eyes, I couldn't tear my gaze away.

"I do," he said. "I'm not really that bright, though. I make B's mostly. But I respect intelligent people a lot more than the stupid meatheads that think they're so great."

I smiled at him and did something I never purposely did to anyone. I laid my hand over his. There was something there this time, something I never expected anyone to feel toward me. It was clear to pick up on, faint but still there. It was affection and it scared the hell out of me to feel it directed toward me. I'd felt affection through touch before, but it was never meant for me. It was just a small feeling, and I didn't even think he knew it was there yet, but it was enough for me to pick up on and enough to make me wary.

As I pulled my hand away, Demyx asked, "Will you ask your dad if you can join the art club?"

"I don't think he'll let me," I said honestly.

"Doesn't he want you having any friends?" he asked with a grin.

Honestly... no. "I don't know," I laughed. "I'll ask him though."

"When will you not be grounded anymore?" he asked, unconsciously leaning toward me.

Never. "I'll have to talk to my father about it," I said with a small wince.

"What did you do to get grounded, if you don't mind me asking?" he asked, tilting his head.

"It's... complicated," I said, beginning to clam up like I always did when being asked about my father.

"Oh," he said with a shrug. "Sorry. But you know if you ever want to talk, I'm here."

"Thanks," I said with a partially fake smile.

"Well, if you ever get un-grounded," he smiled, "we should hit the beach sometime. It'll be fun."

"Sure," I said, nodding. Like that will ever happen.

He proceeded to talk about the beach until the bell rang to go to our next class. As it turned out, we had two more classes together: fifth period English and seventh period art. After school Demyx offered to drive me home but I declined, thinking about how bad it would be if my father saw me with anyone. He would most likely accuse me of trying to spread my witchcraft and never let me see anyone outside of school ever again. I sighed as I trudged the few blocks home from school, preparing myself for the onslaught until another day of school saved me from my own

personal hell.

A/N: Thank you to all my readers and reviewers for your words of encouragement. I greatly appreciate each and every one of you. Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoy. :D

Chapter 4

"Welcome home, son," my father said as I walked into the house. "How was school?" he asked, taking a sip of what looked like rum.

"It was okay," I said as I closed the door behind me.

"What happened to your face?" he asked, looking at me for the first time.

I took a deep breath and said, "Some guy at school was being mean to this gay couple and hit me when I stood up for them."

"Good for him," he said with a nod. "Homosexuals," he sneered. "They're almost as bad as witches and need to be put down just as much. Am I right?"

I was silent, not wanting to speak against him in fear of a beating and not wanting to lie and say something I did not actually believe. The comment made me cringe inwardly and I feared what would happen if he ever found out about me, not that I had acted on my sexuality. I was never given the chance.

"Did you say your prayers today?"

"No, Father," I said honestly. If I had said yes, he would have known I was lying and start quoting Bible verses about how liars end up in Hell.

"You need to start speaking to your Lord," he said as he eyed me from the table.

I hesitated before asking, "Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, Boy?" he asked, looking up from his book.

"Ah... my art teacher wants to know if I can join the art club," I said, biting my lip. "I told her I'd ask you."

"Art club?" he asked, pulling his eyebrows together.

"Yeah..." I said, fidgeting with my hands as my heart sped up. "It's an after-school club that meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays from three-thirty to five. She wants to know if I can join."

"Hmm," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Is there any way of getting in contact with your art teacher?"

I nodded, pulling a post-it note with Ms. Martin's cell phone number on it out of my pocket. I knew he wouldn't take my word on it, so I had come prepared. "This is her number," I said, handing him the note. Please... please... give me an outlet here.

"Sit," he said, motioning to the chair opposite him at the kitchen table.

I immediately sat down, placing my bag on the table as he went to call my teacher, most likely to confirm my story. I just hoped she would tell him that she wanted me to join instead of telling him that it was my idea. That would be the deciding factor. My father would never let me do anything I was interested in solely for fun. Of course not.

A few minutes later, he came back in, cell phone in hand, and said, "Sure, son, you can join up.

Just be sure not to be late getting home afterward."

"Thanks, Dad," I said, trying not to sound as happy as I actually was. I bit my lip and hesitated before deciding to take the plunge, "And uh... some boys from school invited me to go to the beach sometime. I don't know when they were planning, but-"

"Absolutely not," he said, raising his voice slightly. "Your schoolwork is much more important than any beach."

"But if I get all my work done..." I said, knowing instantly that I'd gone too far.

"I said no," he said, standing over me. "Do you not understand the meaning of the word?"

I knew it was coming before it did, but I didn't dare raise my arms in defense. It had taken me a long time to quell the instinct to defend myself, but if I tried to stave him off, the beating would only be worse. I closed my eyes as the back of his hand came down forcefully on my face, almost knocking me out of the chair. He ended up hitting me right where Seifer had punched me, which hurt a lot worse but would hide the fact that I had been hit again. I took a deep breath and braced myself as he lifted me by the back of my shirt.

He threw me on the ground and delivered a swift, brutal kick to my gut, knocking the breath out of me. Then he grabbed a fistful of my hair and lifted me out of the fetal position I'd been cowering in. I shut my eyes tight as he balled up his fist, but the hit never connected. Suddenly, he let go of my hair, dropping me back onto the floor.

"Go," he said with a sneer, "up to your room."

"I'm sorry, Father," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.

"Run along and do your schoolwork," he said, his voice growing dark.

"Yes, sir," I said, hanging my head as I climbed the stairs to my prison.

"Do you feel like eating anything tonight?" he asked as we stood on either side of my open door.

"Do you feel like feeding me?" I asked, shoving my hands in my pockets without looking at him.

"Are you going to repent?" he asked as he handed me my bag.

"No," I said as I took it from him.

"I'll not give hospitality to the devil," he said as he closed the door in my face. "Witch," he said like a curse as I heard the sound of his key in the lock.

I sighed as I slumped against my door, reaching up to touch my face. It was only then, when I was completely alone, that I let the tears fall. No one else had ever seen me cry, nor would they ever get the chance to. Not even my father had ever seen me cry, except for maybe when I was littler.

I reached into my bag, feeling for the digital audio recorder I'd had running, stopping the recording and switching it off when I felt it. Then I went to my closet, prying up the farthest reachable floorboard and pulling out the shoebox I had stashed there. There were about three years worth of recordings here, photographs too. I'd stolen my father's Polaroid a few years ago while we were unpacking from a move and he never suspected a thing, thinking it got lost during the move. It had taken me a bit longer to get the recorder, but I'd managed to scrounge up some money to buy one.

I took the only flash drive I knew still had useable space out of the box, taking it and the recorder

to my laptop, which I'd asked my father for around the same time I'd acquired the audio recorder (for school purposes, of course). I immediately transferred the files from my laptop to the USB drive. I didn't want the files on my PC since my father does routine checks to make sure I'm still only using it for school. I was always so afraid he would find out what I was doing. Then, not only would he destroy all the evidence I'd worked so hard to gather, but he would go into a rage and maybe even going so far as to take me out of public school. I'd planned to go to the Radiant Garden Police Department, but I got scared and never went through with it. Next time I made plans, I wouldn't chicken out.

After I stashed everything away and put the floor back together, I picked up my messenger bag and pulled out the first book my hand made contact with. It just happened to be my art textbook, which gave me a better idea than sitting here rereading text books I'd read already. I went over to my bed, reaching under it to feel for my sketchbook. I sat there affectionately flipping through years of work, watching as the drawings and scribbles progressed in depth and skill until I finally came to a blank page. There, I took one of my lighter pencils and began to draw Demyx's face from memory. I knew every line as well as any photograph could show. The end result was more than just his face, though. I remembered the feeling I perceived from him and the affection that blossomed within him. The final composition was more than just a mere drawing. It was Demyx through and through, his face along with his heart and soul. I'd managed to capture him completely.

If I wasn't careful, this could blossom into an obsession, or even worse... something real. I couldn't afford to have real feelings for anyone. I moved too often to make any real friends, let alone have a solid relationship. The last "relationship" I had was with a little girl in first grade, right before our first move and way before I'd discovered I was gay. Other little boys had their little girlfriends and so did I, but just because it was "normal." But when you've been to nine elementary schools, two middle schools, and four high schools all in a rough twelve-year period, it's tough to even settle in. There's no way I could have a good relationship when the threat of moving again constantly looms right around the corner.

No, I couldn't have a real relationship. I would just end up moving again, especially if my father found out that the relationship was with another boy. It would be bad for both of us and I couldn't do that to Demyx. The best thing I could do for him was to shut him out right now, before things got out of hand. So I asked myself... why wasn't I doing that very thing? Why was I sitting here, staring at my drawing of his face, and contemplating trying to have something? I didn't even know for sure if he was even gay. Why was I torturing myself with thoughts of "us?" Why was I looking back on the vision I'd had when we first touched and thinking about how it would actually feel to be held by him? It was a bad thing to dwell on, and there was no way it could ever end well.

A/N: Don't ask me, "Well if he had all that evidence against his father, why did he not go to the police?" because I asked my friend that very question and it will be explained later in the story. Thank you for reading. :D

Chapter 5

I made up my mind that I would try to stay far away from Demyx. It would never work between us, and I felt... so strangely for him, something I'd never really felt before. I couldn't let that feeling get out of hand because it had the potential to ruin everything. My determination, however, did not get very far.

I felt him in the cafeteria before he even saw me. I had my back to him, and he took this as an opportunity to sneak up behind me. He covered my eyes with his hands and from the moment his skin touched mine, my resolve melted away and I smiled.

"Hello, Demyx," I said, unable to keep myself from feeling happy in his presence. From that moment on I knew that it was too late for either of us to be spared from this.

He giggled as he sat next to me and said, "Ooh that bruise really got bad, didn't it?"

I gave a halfhearted smile and said, "Yeah, Seifer really got me good."

"Ouch," he said as he bit his lip. "I'm glad he got suspended for that." He reached up to gently run the tips of his fingers along the side of my face, centimeters away from the bruise.

I had to force myself to keep still and not lean into his hand. It was like I'd known this guy for months instead of just a couple days. I was so comfortable with his touch, something I'd never been comfortable with from anyone else. It could either be a good thing or a very... very bad thing. When I was thinking logically, I would have been leaning toward the latter but right now... it was so difficult to think of anything bad coming from this.

"Did you talk to you father about the art club?" he asked as he fidgeted with his hands.

"Yeah," I said with a bright smile. "He actually said I could join."

"Cool," he said, his smile brightening his eyes and causing me to smile in return. "And about the beach?"

I cringed and said, "He's still... iffy about that."

"Aw," he said with a small pout that looked simply adorable on him. "Well, that's okay. At least we get to hang out for another couple hours after school."

"Yeah," I sighed. "What exactly does the art club do?"

"Well lots of stuff," he said, talking with his hands. "I talked to Ms. Martin after school yesterday and she said that we'll be taking a field trip to a local art museum on Thursday. That's to help students get inspiration for a mural we want to do on the side of the gymnasium."

"Wow," I said, amazed at first. But then worry set in, "Will we be gone all day Thursday? Will we still be back by five?"

"Oh yeah," he said with a sharp nod. "We should."

As the bell rang for first period, Demyx and I made our way out of the cafeteria. It was only when he got up and removed his hand from the bench that I realized that our little fingers had been touching that entire time. The feeling was like a warm glow that spread throughout my being. It made me... surprisingly happy. That feeling lingered for a while, even after the contact was over.

After just a few moments, however, it began to fade and I felt empty.

What was it about this guy that had me craving his touch? In a way, I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand being dependent on another person. But the way he made me feel... I didn't know if I could stand being away from him either. The entire ordeal was maddening.

The day passed quickly, which was both good and bad in a way. It was good because the time it took to see Demyx again seemed like a couple of hours instead of the entire school day. It was bad because I knew this day wouldn't last and I would have to head home at five. Most kids hated leaving home and going to school. Well I was just the opposite. School gave me a relatively safe haven away from the tyrant I had for a father. It gave me an opportunity to get away.

"Zexion," Ms. Martin said as she approached me after seventh period was over. "And Demyx too, of course," she said, nodding at the boy beside me. "You both came so late in the school year that I wouldn't expect you to try to catch up to the point the rest of us are now in our projects, but we're about to begin a new one on Thursday. I told you, Demyx, but I'm not sure if I told Zexion yet that we're going to an art museum on Thursday?"

"Yes, ma'am," Demyx said with a smile.

"Demyx told me," I said, meeting her quizzical gaze.

"Good," she said, clapping her hands together. "Well, the reason for the trip is to brainstorm ideas and to get inspiration for a mural the club will be doing on one of the gymnasium's outer walls. I must make it clear that we don't aim to copy anything we see. We will not be plagiarizing anyone's work."

"That won't be a problem," I assured her. "I'm more than capable of coming up with my own original work."

"That's good," she said as she adjusted her ponytail. "Now, since the others are just finishing up their previous projects, do either of you have any art you'd like to share?"

"Not with me at the moment," Demyx said. "I left my stuff at home."

"Same," I said, glancing over at Demyx.

"Well would you mind bringing some of it in?" she asked. "Maybe tomorrow so I could look at it during class?"

"Sure," Demyx said, placing his hand on his hip. "And I'm sure Zexy will too."

Zexy? That's the first time in my life that anyone has ever used a nickname when referring to me. "Uh... yeah," I said, rubbing the back of my head.

"Alright," said the teacher. "Well... I don't know what I would have you two doing now. I'll tell you what, if you want you can take one of those buckets of primer and the rollers with the extension pole and give the northern gymnasium wall a first coat. It's the wall facing the parking lot. Oh! And here." She turned around and rummaged through a few stacks of paper before picking up two sheets, handing one to each of us as she said, "Take these. They're the permission forms for your parents to sign about the field trip on Thursday."

I took mine and inwardly groaned. There was very little chance that my father would sign a permission form. I would have to rely on the fact that it was for educational purposes. It would absolutely ruin my week if I had to stay behind while everyone else in the art club, including Demyx, got to go on a field trip.

I slipped the paper into my bag before going to the bucket's she'd pointed out. They were really heavy, but between the two of us, we managed to carry a bucket out to the gym. The wall was old and dirty and the previous coat of paint was peeling in places, but it was workable.

"Hey," Demyx said as we opened the barrel. "You wanna see my baby?" he asked.

"What?" I asked, looking up at him with a puzzled expression.

"Look there," he said, pointing out into the parking lot. "See that silver 1996 Pontiac Firebird?"

"I'm not good with cars," I said, blinking a few times.

"The passenger side mirror is missing and the trunk is a different color than the rest of the car," he said, pointing.

"I see it," I said, spotting the silver car with the blue trunk. "Nice."

"Like her?" he said with a smile. "I worked my butt off to save up the money to get that car. Put a lot of work into her too. Her name's Cindy."

"You work on cars?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No," he said with a giggle. "But my biological mom's wife is teaching me a bit."

"I don't know much about cars," I admitted. "And you said your mom's... wife... is teaching you?"

"Yeah," he said, sending me a sideways glance. "I... uh... got made fun of a lot in elementary school because I have two moms instead of a mom and a dad, but I have the best family any kid can ask for. At first my mom was going to be a surrogate for a gay couple, but she got too attached to me and the couple she was going to give me to decided that they couldn't take me from her so they moved real close to us. Now it's like I have two moms and two dads."

"You're lucky," I said as he poured the primer into a paint pan and dipped his roller into it.

"Well I'm sure having just a mum and a dad is lucky too," he said.

"I... don't have a mom," I said with a forced smile. "It's been just me and my dad ever since I was born."

"Oh..." he said. "Sorry to hear that." He paused for a minute before saying, "Well you should meet my parents sometime. All four of them." He began to paint the building as I dipped my roller into the pan.

"I'd love to," I said with a genuine smile. "But I don't know if I'll ever have the chance."

"Is your dad the type that wants you to get all wrapped up in school work?" he asked.

"Sort of," I answered.

"Well you could say you were going to tutor a friend," he said. "I could use help with my math homework, if you're any better at math than I am."

"That could be a valid excuse," I said. "I'll have to talk to him about it."

I had to force myself to avert my eyes when Demyx took off his shirt. It was very hard not to

follow the contours of his toned chest down his abdomen to the point where I could barely see the rim of his boxers poking out from under his jeans.

He saw me looking and said, "I didn't want to get my polo covered in white paint. You should take yours off too. That looks like a good turtleneck."

"No," I said, grabbing the hem of my shirt and holding it down with one hand while adjusting the collar with the other, making sure the neck was still high enough to hide the finger marks on my neck.

His expression was unreadable as he looked from my face down to where I was holding my collar before letting his gaze lower to my chest and down to where I was holding the hem. He shook his head slightly before letting a huge smile break across his face as he threw one arm over my bony shoulders.

"Come on, then," he said as he tossed his shirt aside. "Let's get some work done."

He began to roll up the legs of his jeans. Seeing this, I followed suit. It was slightly difficult to roll up my pants legs since I'd shrunk out of all my jeans and they were so baggy on me, but I managed. I felt slightly self-conscious because of how skinny my calves were, but that was something that couldn't be helped. I noticed Demyx looking at my legs, which were really nothing more than skin, bone and a bit of muscle. I had no idea if body fat even existed any more.

I knew he noticed when he lowered his hand to my upper back. It wasn't skin to skin contact, so I didn't pick up anything, but I knew what he was doing. He was feeling for my spine, which was prominent even to the eye. I could only imagine what he was thinking when he felt it. I pulled away, smiling at him as I held my hand out to him. He smiled back, but this time the smile wasn't genuine. When he took my hand, I felt the now prominent emotion circling in his heart. The seed of worry had been planted and if I wasn't careful, it would grow into probing questions and a daunting realization. I couldn't let that happen. It would mean the end of something that hadn't even really begun, the only good thing I had to look forward to. Part of me wanted to shut him out, to ignore and dodge the questions I knew would come. The other part, however... desperately wanted someone to confide in. That part of me that was becoming more and more dominant every day. It wanted someone to know, and if I wasn't careful I could eventually find myself spilling my secrets to this boy I barely even knew.

A/N: Thank you to all my readers and reviewers. You guys are great, and I really appreciate the support. Thank you for reading. Please review. :D

Chapter 6

I sat at the table in front of an empty plate, just like every day at dinner time. Food was within my reach, sitting right in the middle of the table, but I dared not reach for it. Green bean casserole and chicken wings. My father had made a small feast, and like always he had made enough for the both of us. However, like always, I was forced to sit and watch him stuff his face while I went hungry. It didn't matter though. I ignored the sounds my stomach made and the water in my mouth and asked the question that had been burning on my tongue ever since I'd gotten the permission slip from Ms. Martin.

"Dad?" I asked.

"Yes, son?" he said, taking the final bite of a chicken wing before reaching for another one.

"The art club is going on a trip to a local art museum on Thursday. I need you to sign a form for me, please."

"Why?" he asked as he wiped his mouth.

"Well..." I said. "We're going because the teacher wants us to get inspiration for a mural we'll be doing on the gymnasium wall. She also wants us to learn about local artists and their work."

"Will you still get home on time?" he asked.

"We should still be home by five," I said, biting my lip.

"Alright," he said. "Where's the form?"

"Here," I said, pulling it and a pen out of my bag. I wanted him to sign it now before he changed his mind.

I didn't feel any relief until the paper was signed, handed back to me, and placed safely in my bag where he couldn't get to it. Then I worked up the courage to ask the other question that had been bouncing around my brain ever since Demyx suggested it.

"And ah..." I said, looking down at my empty plate. "There's a boy at school who was wondering if I could come by his house after school on Wednesdays and Fridays to tutor him. He really wants to learn, but he doesn't really understand the information. He can't get it without help."

"What's this boy's name?" he asked, leaning in and scratching his chin.

"Demyx O'Donohue," I said, watching my father's face.

"He the one that brought you home today?" he asked. "You friends with this boy?"

I nodded.

"We'll discuss it later," he said as he finished off another chicken wing. "Right now, I want you to come down to the basement with me."

My head popped up at his request. I hadn't even realized we had a basement, and the fact that it had never been brought up before now was a bit suspicious. I didn't like the tone to my father's voice when he mentioned it. I watched him stand to come around the table with dread in my heart. Whatever was down there wouldn't be pretty.

He grabbed my arm and said, "Come along, now."

He led me down the hallway to a small door I'd always thought was a closet, unlocking it before pulling me down into the cold, dark room below. He flicked on a small, harsh florescent light that barely lit the entire space. The room we had descended to was large and bare. It was completely made from concrete with not a single window. There were boxes lining the furthest wall from the door, but other than that the only things in the room were two support beams about three feet apart. One of the beams had a nail sticking out of it on which hung a coil of rope and a bull whip. At this sight, my heart dropped into my stomach and a knot formed in my throat as I tried to twist out of my father's grip.

"Settle down, boy," he said, shoving me in the direction of the posts. "Now, take off your shirt and kneel between them."

"No..." I breathed, backing away with my hands raised.

"Do as I say," he said as he reached for the rope. He pinched a nerve on my shoulder and forced me to my knees, all but ripping my shirt off as he lifted my right arm and began to lash it to one of the beams despite my struggles. "Your Lord shed his blood for you," he said as he finished tying me up. "It's time you returned the favor."

"Don't do this," I said, gulping down the lump in my throat as he finished tying my left arm to the opposite post.

"Your Lord received thirty-nine lashes," he said as he reached for the whip. "Consider yourself lucky that I won't be giving you as many. You'll be getting four." I winced, biting back my cry as I heard the crack of the whip as it made contact with my back. The sting caused my eyes to water but I blinked back the tears, refusing to cry in this man's presence.

"One for the Father," he said, readying the whip again. When it hit me he said, "One for the Son." It felt like he was cleaving flesh from bone with every swing. As I felt the leather bite me again, he said, "One for the Holy Spirit. And finally..." The last crack of the whip was the loudest and it hit me the hardest. My lip was bleeding from where my teeth were digging into it as I forced myself not to scream. I would not give him the satisfaction of knowing he had truly hurt me.

He stepped back, his heavy breathing saturating the air as he said, "One to save your soul."

I couldn't support my weight anymore. I wanted to just fall forward and disappear into the concrete, but the binds around my wrists wouldn't allow me to. I looked weakly up at my father as he made his way around to stand in front of me, a revolver in his hands. He had one bullet in his hand and he lifted it up in front of my eyes to emphasize his point as it was chambered, spun, and snapped into place. So this is how he was going to play now?

He lifted the gun so that it hovered inches away from my face as he said, "Say your Lord's prayer."

"And if I don't..." I huffed, "are you going to kill me?"

"Say... you Lord's prayer," he said, his voice taking on a dangerously dark tone.

I sighed and began, "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation... but deliver us from evil. ...Amen." Deliver us from evil... As if.

He prodded me with his gun and said, "Now your twenty third Psalm."

"Just kill me, already," I said, closing my eyes.

He took a fistful of my hair and yanked my head back as he shouted, "Don't you talk to me like that, you filthy brat." He paused as I looked up at him with both eyes visible. "You're the spitting image of that God-forsaken whore."

"Don't talk about my mother like that!" I yelled, gritting my teeth.

He shoved the barrel of the gun against the underside of my chin and said, "Your twenty third Psalm... now."

"The Lord is my shepherd," I said halfheartedly. "I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley... of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord... for ever."

He backed away from me, taking aim at my forehead and pulling the trigger. I closed my eyes and almost let a tear slide as I heard the click that told me my life was spared. Why couldn't he just end me? That was what everyone wanted. It would make everyone happy, and I knew he wanted to be rid of me... so why did he insist on keeping me alive?

"Your Lord shows you favor on this day," he said, turning to walk away.

"Wait!" I shouted, pulling at my binds. "You can't just leave me here like this."

"It will give you time to converse with your Lord," he said as he made his way up the stairs. "I'll be back to retrieve you later."

"Dad!" I yelled as he closed and locked the door behind him.

I tried to stand, to give my wrists a break from holding my weight, but I didn't have the strength to lift myself onto my feet. I looked down to see the small pool of blood that had accumulated beneath me and blanched at the sound of more blood droplets falling to the floor. Maybe I would end up bleeding too much and dying from exsanguination, but I doubted it. The wounds would clot way before I lost enough blood to be fatal.

I sighed as my mind kept dwelling on my own demise. I wanted to die. That much was certain. It was opportunity I lacked more than motive and desire. Even if the situation were resolved, I didn't know whether I would be able to live with the physical and emotional scars that were left in its wake. I was a broken vessel, and there was no coming back once everything was said and done.

If everything went right, I would be home free in just a little under a year. I would legally be an adult and my father would no longer have any sort of hold over me. After all these years of torment, I could almost taste my freedom. When I hit that milestone, I would be free to live... or die... as I saw fit. My life would no longer be in his hands and I could determine how it ended.

A/N: This was a very hard chapter to write, so I hope you'll appreciate it. I'm sorry it was a bit late to upload, but there will be more soon... probably. I don't know exactly what happened after this, so it will be partially my own creative influence. Thank you for

reading. :)

Chapter 7

Later that night, my father came down to the basement and escorted me back up to my room. He briefly spoke to me, telling me to get my homework done, before he locked me in my room for the night. I could barely stand on my own two legs. I didn't know how long I'd been tied up in the basement, but it was long enough to make my arms go numb and my legs almost completely give out. I couldn't think of anything other than crawling painfully into bed and crashing for the night.

When I awoke the next morning, it was well before sunrise and the events of the previous day seemed like a hazy nightmare. However, as soon as I pulled myself into a sitting position, I felt the welted stripes on my back, scabs cracking as I moved. I groaned as I trudged to the closet to pull out the Polaroid I had hidden there to document the injuries. I didn't want to waste film, but it was difficult to get the angle right, so I settled for taking a picture in my closet mirror. I also took a picture of my wrists, of the rope marks there, before stashing everything away.

I sighed. Now I would have more marks to hide. I just hoped my wounds wouldn't get infected, since there was no way I would be allowed to see a doctor about them. I'd have to manage them on my own.

I quickly stripped out of the clothes from the previous day and slipped into a fresh set. As soon as I buttoned my jeans, I knew I'd have to scrounge around the local thrift store to find a few better fitting pairs. I had lost so much weight recently that I was now probably around a size twenty-five (or four in women's). For now, I would have to make do with tightening belts and rolling up pants legs.

Once I was dressed and ready to go, I pulled out the math homework I hadn't had the chance or the will to finish last night. The problems were easy, simple for me, so it didn't take me long at all to complete the work. I hated waking up so early in the morning without the ability to leave my room until my father unlocked the door. I was stuck in here with nothing to do once I'd gotten ready. I'd already read through my school books and there was nothing new there.

The only thing that really held my interest was my sketch pad at this point. I could draw for hours... so I did. There wasn't really any substance to what I drew. They were just random doodles: a dragon, a clockwork seahorse, and a mangled tree. To anyone else's eye, they would be works of art by themselves, but to me they were just doodles. I could do much better, as evidenced by my drawing of Demyx. It was my favorite so far.

Glancing at my clock, my heart sped up when I realized that I had ten minutes before the school closed the cafeteria for breakfast and my father hadn't come up to unlock my door yet.

I stood up, shoving my sketch pad into my bag before pounding on my door and yelling, "Dad! Where are you? Unlock my door! I'm going to be late for school!" Hearing nothing but a quiet house, I slammed my fists against the door again and shouted with all my might, "Dad!"

I heard footsteps coming up the stairs and stepped back as I heard the sound of his key in the lock.

"Sorry about that, kiddo," he slurred, obviously hung over. He'd probably stayed up all night drinking and passed out on the couch. He grabbed my wrist and I winced as he pulled back the fabric to look at the rope burns there. "You keep this covered, ya hear? People... People won't understand that I'm trying to help you."

"I know, Dad," I said, pushing past him. If I hurried, I might be able to eat this morning.

"Hey, Zexion," he said, stopping me.

"Yes?" I questioned, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

"About that boy you want to tutor," he said, blinking. "Bring him by the house this afternoon. I wants to meet him."

My eyes widened as I nodded. This was a disaster waiting to happen. There were a certain number of facts about Demyx and his family that would ensure I never saw him again if discovered by my father. I wouldn't be able to bear it if that happened. I had to make sure this meeting went well, but how?

It wasn't until lunch that day that I brought up the subject to Demyx. Around gulping down my lunch in a frenzy (I'd missed breakfast), I managed to get the words out.

"My dad, uh... wants to meet you this afternoon," I said with a hiccup.

"Really?" he said as he took small bites of a salad. "That's cool. Just after school, then?"

"Yeah..." I said, running a hand through my hair. "But it's not as simple as that."

"Why not?" he asked, looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Well..." I tried to explain. "It's difficult to explain. My father is... very religiously inclined and anything that conflicts with his beliefs he... well he..."

"So no mentioning that homosexuality runs rampant in the family?" he asked with a grin. "Gotcha."

"Well, he's probably going to ask about your family," I said, biting my lip. "Don't lie to him, but... I'd say just tell him about your biological parents as if they were your only parents."

"Keeping him in blissful ignorance?" he giggled.

"Exactly," I said, laughing halfheartedly.

"Don't worry about it," he said, placing his arm over my shoulder. "It's not like I'm going to walk into your house and tell him all about every aspect of my life, or about my intentions toward his son."

His last statement made me pause. I tried to speak several times, but the words just wouldn't form. Finally I asked, "There are intentions?"

He chuckled and said, "Well let's just take it one step at a time. Am I correct in assuming that you're interested in men?"

I could feel a blush on my cheeks, but hopefully my hair would hide that fact as I looked toward the floor and said, "I've never really... told anyone that before. I mean... if anyone found out and told my dad... I would be... in big trouble." I shivered at the thought of what my father might do if he ever found out I was gay.

"I'm usually good at picking up on things," he said, his voice and his face becoming unreadable.

I looked up at him then. Something about the way he said that... something was just off. "What do you —" I was interrupted by the bell signaling us to go to our next class.

"We'll talk about deceiving your father later, kay?" he said as we headed toward our mutual fifth period English class.

The rest of the day passed in a blur until art class, where my brain finally kicked in again. I turned in my signed permission slip to Ms. Martin, letting out a sigh of relief when it was finally in her possession. She then asked if we had brought some of our artwork and I began to shake my head until I remembered that I had put my sketchbook in my bag this morning. I handed it over to her, telling her about the years worth of work inside. She smiled as she looked it over, the amazement on her face increasing every time she turned a page. I could tell when she was getting toward the end when she paused at one of my latest drawings.

"Oh my gosh," she said with a small laugh. "It's Demyx."

"What?" Demyx said as he looked up at me. He stood, coming around to look at the drawing. The look of awe on his face was more than that of Ms. Martin.

"When did you sit for this?" she asked him.

"I never... did," he said, tearing his face away from the drawing to look into my eyes for a moment before I looked away. I never really wanted him to see it.

"I remember faces really well," I explained, biting my lip. "I drew that the afternoon after I met him."

"Really?" she said, looking up at me. "It's very good and very detailed. You can have your book back now if you'd like. I've seen enough. You've got real talent, Zexion. I'm proud to have you in our art club."

"Thank you," I whispered as I took the sketchbook back from her. It was more of a compliment than anyone has ever given me.

"Just between you two and me," she said in a low tone to the both of us, "you're free to go whenever you feel like it. There's nothing more to be done today. Just remember to be here bright and early tomorrow to catch the bus to the museum."

I nodded and Demyx said, "Thanks, Ms. Martin."

As the other students were busy finishing up their previous projects, Demyx and I slid out the back door to the parking lot.

"So," Demyx said with a smile as he opened the passenger door of his car for me. "We've basically got an hour before we're due to be at your place for this confrontation with your father. What do you want to do?"

"I'd rather just get this over with and tell my father that the teacher let us out early," I sighed.

"Well it is a Wednesday," he said. "It's one of the days you're supposed to tutor me. So if everything goes well, we can head over to my place before the day ends."

"I suppose that's true," I said. "But there's almost no way he's going to let me."

"Trust my brilliance," he said. "All I have to do is act like a good little brainwashed Christian, right?"

"That's one way to put it," I said with a small, but genuine laugh.

"Well, let's go then," he said with a smile. "Seatbelts."

I nodded, buckling myself in as he started his car and headed toward what I was sure to be certain doom.

A/N: I know it's been a while since I've uploaded. I'm getting back into a funk. ./ I'll try to write more soon, but with all the stuffies going on with the theatre and all... idk when I can get another chapter in. I know this one seems a little rushed, and I'm sorry about that. The next one will be better quality, I swear. Thanks for reading. :D

Chapter 8

My heart was racing as we pulled up in front of my house. I had no idea how this little meeting my father had arranged would go. If Demyx played the part right, there was a small chance that everything would be fine. However, one little slip up could potentially cause a disaster. I would either never be allowed to spend any time with Demyx other than when I absolutely had to make contact with him for school, or in the worst case scenario... we would move again... and I would never see him again.

He must have seen the look on my face, because he reached over to me, brushing his fingers along my jaw as he said, "Everything's gonna be fine."

I closed my eyes and immediately relaxed. His touch did wonders to calm my nerves. He wasn't worried at all. He was actually... somewhat looking forward to meeting my father. If he only knew the monster that was hiding behind the elaborate mask. Of course, my father would be a picture of good humor and kindness to any stranger I brought into the house. He always seemed like an upstanding member of society to anyone who didn't look too deeply below the surface. It was an illusion that I was never able to break no matter how hard I tried. But of course, if I did anything to outright try and break the façade, I would be severely punished for it later, when there were no watchful eyes to see.

"Well, come on then," he said, getting out of the car and coming around to my side.

"Right," I said, looking up at the windows. He would surely be watching us now, judging every movement.

I let myself in and ushered Demyx into the house, which was much cleaner than it usually was, spotless in fact. I guess he really wanted to put on a good show.

"Dad?" I called when I was not immediately greeted.

"In here," he shouted from the kitchen.

I led Demyx into the kitchen, where my father was washing dishes, elbow deep in soapy water.

"Hey, kiddo," he said with a smile. I expertly suppressed a shiver. He never smiled. At least, he never greeted me with one.

"Hey, Dad," I said, forcing myself to smile back. I had to keep up the illusion, right? "This is Demyx O'Donohue."

"Pleased to meet you," he said, drying his hands before offering a handshake.

"It's good to meet you, Mr. Corazza," Demyx said as he vigorously shook my father's hand.

"Please," he chuckled, "call me Xigbar. That's quite a handshake you've got there, boy."

"Thanks... Xigbar," he said with a smile. The whole ordeal made me fidgety. "Would you like some help with that?" he asked, motioning to the sink.

"Naw," he said, waving away the offer. "I got it. Thanks though. Hey, would you like to stay for dinner?"

My head shot up at this. My father never let anyone stay for dinner. It meant that he would have to

feed me unconditionally. He was really going all out for this happy family ruse.

"No thank you, sir," Demyx answered. "While I appreciate the offer, I should head home in a bit. I was rather hoping Zexion could come with me. You know, to help me with my math. We've got a test coming up, you see, and I don't think I can pass if I don't have help."

"What math you taking?" he asked, throwing the dish towel he was holding over his shoulder.

"Pre-calculus algebra," he said with a wrinkle of his nose. "It's hard. Zexion takes the same one and he seems to pick it up pretty quick."

"He is good with his numbers," he said with a small chuckle. "So tell me about yourself, Demyx."

"Well what is it you'd like to know?" Demyx asked with a shrug.

"What's your home life like?" he asked, tilting his head.

There it was. I hoped Demyx could pull this off.

"Well, my mother and father are separated," he said seamlessly. "They live real close to each other and I spend an equal amount of time with both of them, but they've been separated since I was born."

"So it's just you and your mom at home?"

"Well, my mom has a roommate, sir," he said. "She helps pay the bills and such. They're real close friends."

"I see," he said, stroking his chin. "Well, what do you want to do with your life, then, after you graduate?"

"College, I guess," he shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it much. I wanted to major in music."

"You're a musician, then? What do you play?"

"I can play just about any string instrument, but the sitar, guitar, and bass are my favorites."

My father nodded, contemplating his words before he turned to me and said, "A word, Zexion?"

"Yes, sir," I said as I followed him out of the kitchen.

"How did you meet this boy?" he quietly asked when we were alone.

"I bumped into him on my first day," I answered. "We had the same first period and he sat next to me."

"Hmm..." he said, nodding and furrowing his brow. "Well, I don't see how a nice boy like that would be friends with the likes of you, but I see no harm in you tutoring him. Maybe something will rub off on you."

"Thanks, Dad," I said, trying not to sound too thrilled that he actually agreed. "He needs it."

"Hmm... Be home by ten," he said, leading me back into the kitchen. "Well, you boys run along then. I hope you do well on your test, Demyx. Lemme know how it goes, kay?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Corazza," he smiled.

"It's Xigbar, remember," he said. "Now get out of here."

I waited until we were actually pulling away from the house before saying, "I can't believe he actually let me do this."

"Breathe, Zexy," Demyx laughed. "I told you everything would be okay. People generally like me. But you know we'll still have to do some actual studying, right?"

"Yeah," I said, amazement still coursing through me. "No problem. There has to be some tangible progress in your math skills now that I'm supposedly tutoring you."

"And there will be," he said. "Maybe we can do some real tutoring on Fridays and on Wednesdays we can just... goof off."

"Sounds good to me," I laughed.

"So..." he said, eying me as he drove. "Do you want to just go back to my place, or maybe go to the beach? I actually live like... ten minutes walking distance from the beach, so I'll leave it up to you."

"Well, I don't have anything to swim in," I said, hanging my head.

"I can loan you a pair of trunks no problem," he said.

"And a shirt?" I asked, biting my lip.

"You swim in your shirt?" he asked.

"Y-Yeah," I said, still not looking at him. "I guess I'm just self-conscious."

"Aw," he said with a chuckle. "Well I think you're gorgeous." He stuck out his tongue at me before saying, "We don't have to go to the beach today. It was just a suggestion. Besides, I met your dad, so now it's time you meet my parents."

"I'd love to," I smiled.

Things were going so well... better than they ever had before. I had someone who seemed to genuinely like me, and I could actually spend time with him. I had an out. I had several things that I could do to get away from home now. However, I didn't know if that would end up being better or worse.

A/N: Here's the next chapter. I was sick and tired of used Xemnas as the douche bag in basically all of my stories, and Xigbar better fit the look and personality of the father in this situation anyway. Thanks for reading.

On a side note, I have a brand new SoRiku up, "Love Changes Everything" Only the first chapter is up as of yet, but I'm working on it just as much as I'm working on this. Too many projects at once? Probably. Can I stop myself? Haha... no. With all the ideas circling around in my head, you're lucky I'm only working on the ones I have going now. No more until they're finished though. I promised myself. :D

Chapter 9

We drove half way across town, from the rough middle where I lived to the outer edges, where Demyx and his family lived in a double-wide trailer. He didn't lie about being close to the beach. You could practically see it from his backyard. As soon as I stepped out of his car, the smell in the air pleasantly hit my nose and I smiled.

"It's not the nicest place in the world," he said as he came around, throwing an arm over my shoulders, "but I don't mind it." He led me into the house, throwing his backpack onto the floor next to the door before announcing, "I'm home, with a guest."

A tall, skinny woman with big emerald green eyes and a long, brunette braid came around the corner where kitchen met living area and beamed at him, "Hi, Sweetie. Who's your friend?"

"Mom," he said, motioning between his mother and me, "this is Zexion. Zexion, this is my mother Aerith."

"It's nice to meet you," she said. "Yuffie, come here and meet Demyx's friend Zexion."

"Just a minute," said another voice from the kitchen. A few moments later, a shorter black-haired woman popped out of the kitchen and introduced herself. "Hi there, Zexion. I'm Yuffie, Aerith's partner."

"It's good to meet you both," I said with a smile. "Demyx has told me good things about you."

"Oh, he didn't mention that we were blood-sucking vampires ready to eat your soul?" Aerith joked. "Because that's what he acts like."

"*Mom*," Demyx whined. He looked at me and laughed.

"We won't hover," Yuffie said. "Make yourself at home, Zexion. And feel free to come and go as you please. Demyx has told us a lot about you as well." She winked at me and I could have sworn I saw Demyx blush.

Demyx nervously laughed again before saying, "Come here. Let me show you my room."

He took my hand and led me down a narrow hallway with three doors off leading off of it and one large den that looked like it was being used as a music room. The last door on the hallway apparently belonged to Demyx, as that's the one he pulled me through. It was a pretty small room with a lot of clutter, but it wasn't messy. The bed was shoved against one corner, the only window right next to it. There was a low table with sheet music strewn across it and a large dresser right next to that.

He threw something under the bed before leaping onto it and pulling himself into a sitting position, patting the space beside him as he said, "You can sit down. It's a part-time couch."

I tentatively sat, smiling when I saw the white teddy bear hidden partially under the bed I assumed that was what he'd thrown from it.

"So, do you want to go to the beach today or no?" he asked, looking at me with those big cyan eyes I couldn't resist.

"Sure," I replied. "If you want to."

"Well it's only my favorite place ever," he chuckled. "Here, I'll get you some trunks. And a shirt, you weirdo."

I laughed and said, "Thanks."

He rummaged around in his bottom dresser drawer for a moment before throwing a pair of blue and green swim trunks in my general direction. "You don't mind using one of the shirts I sleep in do you?" he asked as he opened the second drawer.

"No," I said, picking up the trunks.

"Well, here then," he said, handing me an over-sized white t shirt. "Now you have three options. "I can turn around, leave the room, or just stand here and watch you change." He raised his eyebrows at the last remark.

I chuckled and said, "Just turn around."

"So you trust me enough to take off your clothes with me in the room?" he asked as he turned his back to me. "I'm flattered."

"Well, I'm watching you," I said as I slipped out of my pants and into Demyx's swim trunks. I had to pull the drawstring pretty tight to keep them up, but they fit otherwise.

"I wish I could be watching you," he said, half-jokingly.

"If you saw me you probably wouldn't," I said as I exchanged shirts. "Done."

He turned around and burst into laughter. "That shirt absolutely engulfs you, Zexy," he said. "Want me to get you a smaller one?"

"This is fine," I said, playing with the collar.

"Woah," he said, a serious look on his face as he leaned in closer to me. "What happened there?"

"Where?" I asked, my heart speeding up. What had he seen?

"Your neck..." he said.

"I, ah... hit my bedpost," I lied, hoping he would believe me.

He lifted his hand to my neck and I stiffened as he touched my flesh, sliding his fingers along my neck. I felt the worry in his heart, the worry that only recently materialized. It had deepened and I didn't know how to avoid it getting worse. Once worry had been seeded, it always grew, like it was doing now. There would be questions... I just knew it.

"Ouch..." he said softly.

"Yeah," I said with a small laugh. "Clumsy me. I almost choked to death."

He looked up at me, his eyes meeting mine for the longest moment. I could have sworn there were tears welling up in them before he looked away. I touched his arm, hoping to pick up some reason for sorrow, but I felt nothing that would be behind it. He was just... sad for some reason.

"Come on," I said, forcing a smile, which was really difficult after picking up his sorrow. I let go of his arm before saying, "Let's go have some fun."

"Zexion..." he said, biting his lip and furrowing his brow.

"Yes?" I asked, wincing internally. This was it... This was when the questions started, and once they started to flow they wouldn't stop. I knew that... so why did I stay? Why did I not avoid him and his bloody questions along with him?

He shook his head before a huge smile broke out across his face. He patted my back, which inadvertently hurt the fresh wounds there, before saying, "Alright. Let's go."

He grabbed a small bottle off of his table before heading back down the hallway. He briefly yelled to his parents that we were heading out to the beach and would be back soon. I think it was Aerith that yelled back, "Okay, Sweetie. Wear sunscreen."

"Got it," he called back, holding up the bottle of what I now knew to be sunscreen. "Like I said before," he said to me as we exited the house, "it's only a ten minute walk, but if you want me to drive over there, I'd be more than happy to."

"Walking is fine," I said with a smile.

I was excited when we took our first step onto the white sand. The ocean sprawled out before us, stretching to what seemed like infinity.

"I've never been to the beach before," I said, a huge smile on my face as we walked toward the water. I marveled at the feeling of the sand between my toes and the first lap of a gentle wave on my feet.

"Never?" he asked, astonished.

"Never," I repeated. "We've moved so much... We've been practically everywhere, but I was never able to go to a beach."

"So this is the first time you've stepped foot on a beach?" he asked, eyes wide.

"Yes," I said, meeting his gaze.

"Well come on, then," he said, pulling me into the water.

We waded out until the water was at our waists, stopping there. It was mid-autumn, so the water was fairly cool, but it was still warm enough to swim. There weren't many people here, which surprised me. I thought beaches were always supposed to be crowded.

I caught Demyx staring at me right before he ducked completely under the water. I felt his hands around my ankles as he swept my feet out from under me, causing me to fall backward into the salty water. I came up sputtering and he came up laughing.

"Just be careful you don't get any up your nose," he said. "Stuff stings real bad."

We swam and horsed around for about half an hour before the wind started to pick up and I began being tossed around by bigger waves.

Demyx laughed and said, "Alright, come on. You look like a ragdoll."

We trudged out of the water and I suddenly felt much heavier than I had in the ocean.

Demyx winked at me, gesturing to the waves before saying, "They're more fun if you ride them you know, like a few other things."

I snorted. "What?"

"What?" he asked. "I was talking about the rides at an amusement park. What were you thinking, you perv?"

"Hey, Demyx?" I asked as we walked along the shoreline.

"Hmm?" he asked, looking up from the sand.

"Earlier, you said you had 'intentions,'" I said, scratching the back of my head. "What did you mean by that?"

He winked at me again and asked, "Would you be entirely offended if I said that I think you're absolutely stunning?"

"I don't see why," I said, looking away.

"You don't see yourself clearly at all do you?" he asked, shaking his head. "You're smart, you're gorgeous, and you're extremely talented. As for my intentions toward you... well..." He paused, running his hand down my arm before looking me directly in the eye and saying, "You'll just have to find out."

He began to walk back toward his house when I stopped him. "Wait," I said, closing my eyes and clenching my fists at my sides. If there was any hope left for him... I had to do this.

His entire demeanor changed when he turned to look at me. "Something wrong?" he asked, reaching for me.

I dodged his touch. I wouldn't be able to do this if he touched me. I had to keep my resolve. I took a deep breath and said, "I can't do this."

"What do you mean?" he asked. The look on his face made me cringe inwardly. He looked... hurt. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him, which was why I had to do this.

"I can't... be with you," I said, biting back the urge to cry. No one had ever seen my tears, and it was going to stay that way. "I can't stop thinking about you," I said, closing my eyes as my emotions seethed below the surface. "In the past couple of days, it's just been... different. I can't explain it. I can't concentrate. Every time I'm with you, it gets more intense. Every time you touch me... I start to lose my resistance. If you've any sense of self-preservation, you'll stay away from me. I'm not good for you, Demyx."

"Are you..." he started, letting out a slow breath. "Are you pushing me away?"

"I have to," I said, wrapping my arms around myself. "If I get any closer to you, it'll be too late for either of us. It's already too late for me, I think. I'm just trying to give you a fighting chance. You don't want to have anything to do with me."

He moved closer to my shivering form, reaching for me but never making contact as he asked, "Is that what you really want?"

"No," I whispered, my gaze settling on the ground. "But you'll be better off without me."

I didn't resist when he placed his hand on my face. His touch comforted me in some strange way. I felt his affection for me growing. He acknowledged it now. But underneath the affection was this... pain. I could feel it and it scared me because I knew it wasn't even his. Somehow, somewhere deep inside of him, he knew that *I* was hurting. That knowledge made him feel this twinge of heartache for me that I could barely stand to feel from him.

I looked into his eyes and asked, "Why do you care so much? You don't even know me, really. I'm just a stranger."

"There's just something about you," he said as he slid his thumb over my jaw. "I can't put my finger on it, but I want to..." He paused, letting out a sigh as he closed his eyes. "I want you to feel comfortable enough to let me in. But if you don't want to try, I understand."

"It's not that I don't want to," I said, lifting my hand to his. "I do. It's just that... I don't think you'll like what you find once you really know me. And I'm scared. I'm scared that if you do see me for who I am, you won't feel like this anymore. You won't want me anymore."

"I do see you for who you are, Zexion," he said, taking my hand in his. "I see the good in you that you don't seem to be able to see. You're a beautiful person, inside and out. You're kind and you're selfless. You'd cut yourself off from a good situation because you don't want to hurt the other person involved. But you won't hurt me, Zexion, I promise."

I smiled up at him, squeezing his hand. I didn't want to lose this feeling I was getting from him. It was the best thing I'd felt in a while. For the first time in my life, he made me feel like I could be loved. So I smiled... because I didn't want to cry.

A/N: Why do I feel like I've just put very personal, deep-seeded emotions out there for the world to see? Hehe... I hope you like this chapter. More to come soon, now that I'm on a schedule and I've actually set deadlines for myself. Hopefully, I'll be able to get all of my projects done in a decent amount of time now. Thanks for reading. :D

Chapter 10

Nothing too terribly eventful happened on the field trip the next day. The trip itself didn't really take that long. We were on the bus for about an hour and then spent maybe two hours actually visiting the museum. It was an interesting and informative trip and since it was such a small group (we only had six people and the teacher in the art club), we were generally able to guide ourselves. After we'd completely toured the museum, we still had hours until we had to be back to the school. Ms. Martin decided to take us all out to an expensive looking Italian restaurant where we were allowed to draw on the tables. She told us to start working on honing our ideas for the gymnasium as we were waiting for our food.

After probably the best lunch I've had in the better part of my life, Ms. Martin snapped photos of our drawings and asked us how we wanted to spend the rest of the day. Most of the students said they wanted to go to the mall, which was basically in the same parking lot as the restaurant where we were. By popular demand, she led us to the mall, telling us a time to meet back at the bus before letting us go our own way.

Demyx and I wandered around a while, not really staying too long in one place and not really interested in any of the more popular stores. After a while, we came to a little store off of the food court that caught Demyx's eye.

"Oh, I didn't know they had one of these here," he said, grabbing my wrist as he pulled me toward the entrance.

"What is this place?" I asked, looking around at all the different cultural items around the store.

"It's a place I used to come to all the time before we moved here," he said. "It has all kinds of great music and they have a lot of crystals and statuary. Back home, they used to let me play my sitar in here and they'd give me free stuff for it."

"Wow," I said, taking in the atmosphere of the place.

"Can I help you with something?" asked a smiling employee as she walked toward us.

"Actually," Demyx said, raising his hand as he made his way toward her. "I was wondering if..." He trailed off, talking about things that were completely alien to me. I didn't know music that well, especially that of other cultures, so I wandered off to look at some of the wares. Like Demyx had said, they were stocked with a lot of crystals and semiprecious stones, most often fashioned into unique jewelry. They had a lot of stuff from places like Africa and India and I even saw polished wooden statues of a few of their gods and goddesses. They also carried various oils and incenses. It wasn't really my kind of place, but I could admire it.

After a while talking to the attendant, Demyx returned to me with a huge smile on his face and his hands behind his back. "I got you something," he said.

"Really?" I asked, looking up at him with awe.

He tilted his head and held out a necklace, a single blue glass bead attached to a black nylon cord. I smiled, taking the bead in my hand and running my fingertips over it. No one had really ever given me a gift before.

"It's not much," he said with a shrug. "But I thought of you when I saw it. Blue is said to be a healing color that represents trust, loyalty, and communication. And it... matches your eyes."

"Thank you, Demyx," I said, pulling the cord over my head and marveling at the feel of the cool glass against my skin. "I'll treasure it."

He lit up at my statement, tossing his arm over my shoulders as he led me out of the establishment and said, "It's about time to be heading back to the bus, I guess."

I nodded, resisting the sudden urge to embrace him as we headed toward the parking lot. It was a strange feeling. I'd never really had any reason to hug someone before. Plenty of people have hugged me, usually against my will, and I've returned the gesture simply to not appear rude. However, I've never actually wanted to hug a person before now. There was just something about Demyx that caused me to blatantly ignore my avoidant personality and I realized that I'd been doomed from the start, from that very first touch. He was like no other person I'd met and I couldn't have avoided him if I'd wanted to.

Back at the bus, students were beginning to load and it looked like everyone was here until Ms. Martin asked, "Where's Namine?"

One of the other girls, a redhead whose name I didn't know said, "We talked her into getting her nails done. She should be back any minute."

I gulped, glancing at Demyx's watch. We would be cutting it close already. There was no time to waste waiting on fingernails.

"Something wrong?" Demyx asked, looking at me with a worried expression.

"I told my dad we'd still be home by five," I said. "We're cutting it close."

"Won't he understand if we got delayed?" he asked, biting his lip.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never missed a curfew before so I don't know how he'll react." I've never had a curfew *to* miss before. It's always just been a direct route from school back home. I've never had any reason to stay out until now.

"You want me to try to explain it to him?" he asked, placing his hand over mine.

"If you could just drive me home when we get back," I said with a forced smile, "that would be great."

"Okay," he said. "Sure thing."

Finally, Namine was spotted and as she made her way onto the bus, she said, "Sorry." She held up her hand to show her fingernails that had been painted white with black flowers.

"That everyone?" asked the driver.

"Yes," said Ms. Martin as the engine was started.

We would see if the five minutes she'd been late would mean anything.

Just over an hour later, I took a deep breath as Demyx pulled up in front of my house. It was five o'clock on the dot, according to his car's clock. I muttered a quick, "Bye," before jolting out of his car and into the house.

I saw my dad sitting there as I walked through the door. For a moment, he said nothing. He just looked at me with those cold, disapproving eyes. Then, "You're two minutes late."

"The bus was held up waiting for someone," I said quietly, my eyes searching my father's face.

"That's no excuse," he said, lighting a cigarette he had between his teeth. That was odd. I knew he drank (and if the almost empty bottle of whiskey on the table was any indication, he *had* been drinking), but I never knew he smoked as well.

"Normally, I don't get out of the after-school meeting until five," I said. "I always take a few minutes to get home."

"Are you arguing with me?" he asked, rolling the cigarette around in his hands without ever bringing it to his lips.

"No," I said, itching to switch on the audio recorder I always kept in my bag. I should have had the foresight to set it going before I stepped into the house. It was too late now.

"Good," he said with a nod. "The fact is that you told me you'd be home by five o'clock. It was two minutes after five when you walked through that door. Technically, you lied to me."

"I said 'I should' be home by five," I said, backing away from him. I knew that look in his eye very well. "I didn't say I would be."

"Shut up," he said, getting up and making his way over to me. "You know better than to argue with me, you piece of shit."

He was so close now that I could smell the whiskey on his breath before his open hand came down on my face. I closed my eyes as he put his hand around my neck and forced me to the floor, roughly forcing my shirt up. The next thing I knew, it felt like my flesh was on fire as he held the end of his cigarette against my back. He held it there for about five seconds before moving it mere inches up my back. The pain was so intense, but I refused to let out the scream that was building up in my chest. I gritted my teeth against the white hot agony as he burned me again before shoving me against the wall.

"When is this going to end?" I asked, trying to catch my breath. "One of these days, you're actually going to kill me, you know. Then what will you tell the cops when they come?"

"Stop talking," he said, gripping the side of his head as if the sound of my voice caused him genuine pain. He ran a finger along one of the healing likes on my back and said, "Honor thy father."

"And thy mother," I breathed, turning my head to gauge his reaction.

"That woman was a foul, depraved thing," he said, his voice low with hatred. "She was an adulterous whore, a demonic seductress. I'll not have you speak of her in this house."

"Were you beating her too?" I asked, lifting myself to my knees. "Is that why she left you?"

"Don't you use your witchcraft on me, boy," he said, sneering down at me. "Riddled with demons, the both of you. Get out of my sight."

I looked at him for a long moment before snatching my bag off of the floor and heading up to my room. About a minute after I closed the door behind me, I heard his key in the lock, sealing me in for the night. I flopped down onto my bed, lying on my belly and trying not to think about the pain in my back. I wanted so badly to talk to Demyx. When I was with him, everything seemed to be alright again, at least for a while. He had a way of making me forget the pain, enabling me to see past it for a time. He gave me hope that someday it would all be better. I hoped this feeling was true.

A/N: It's very difficult to write about a field trip you weren't a part of. Sorry if it was a little rushed. The storyline picks up next chapter. Thank you for reading, and for sticking with me this long. I know it's hard to read some of this. It's hard to write it too, especially this chapter as those cigarette burns were mine. I said from the start that the story was a mesh of my friend's experiences and my own. The one considerable difference in our stories is that my mother got better with therapy and medication. Anyway, enough of that. Lots of love and smiles to you all. :D

Chapter 11

The weeks passed quickly and winter break was getting nearer. I wanted to spend as much time as possible with Demyx because the more time I got to spend with him, the less horrible and cruel the world seemed. It didn't matter how bad the beatings got or how much worse my father was becoming. I had someone who cared about me. Because of Demyx, I was able to withstand anything my father threw at me.

I had to be honest with myself, though, and admit that I was afraid. Recently, my father had taken to drink a lot more heavily than normal. When he was drunk, it didn't matter how quiet or well behaved I was or what excuse I could come up with. He didn't have to have a reason to beat me. He just did it.

I wasn't going to think about that now. I was with Demyx, walking along the shoreline. It was too cold to swim now, but we still enjoyed trips to the beach. The sounds of the ocean and light of the sunset set the mood for a wonderful evening. For the first time in a long time, I was genuinely happy.

There was something slightly off about him, though, that I'd been noticing a lot recently. He always seemed as if he had to fake a good mood when he was with me. There was nothing I could pick up through touching him that would cause this change, and I could still feel his blossoming affection for me, but I was worried now. He was holding something back from me. I knew that he'd been withholding his questions, but this seemed deeper than that.

We stopped moving as Demyx looked across the horizon and said, "God really does paint a beautiful picture, doesn't He?"

I paused, hesitating before replying, "I don't believe in God." It was the first time I'd ever told anyone that. I'd always been afraid of judgment or worse... that the confession would somehow get back to my father. But with Demyx, I didn't have to worry.

"Oh..." he said, worrying at his lip. "Sorry. I didn't mean to offend. Is... there a reason?"

I shrugged and said, "There's just too much pain and suffering in the world for a benevolent deity to exist. If God does exist, he doesn't care about us."

"Can I ask you something?" he asked after a moment. "Feel free not to answer, but if you do I want you to answer honestly."

I paused, looking quizzically up at him and said, "Sure." Was this it, then? I still didn't know how I would react to his questions. I'd gone over probably a hundred different scenarios in my mind, depending on how he asked, but nothing could prepare me for the real thing.

"Are you..." he began, biting his lip. He took a small breath, looked me in the eye and asked, "Are you being abused?"

I blinked, looking away as I asked, "Why would you think that?" My heart was pounding in my chest and I couldn't stop myself from shaking. I didn't want to have this conversation, not now.

"Well..." he said, looking me over. "For one thing, you're really... you're really skinny. You scarf down every school meal like it's your last, so I know you're not just... anorexic or something. And I've seen... bruises... on your wrists and... and your neck. And I've seen the scars... on your back."

I was breathing slowly, not looking him in the eye. He was very perceptive and I could tell that my distress caused him pain. I wanted to confide in him so badly, but I couldn't make myself form words. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes and I knew that if I didn't get away from him now, he would see me cry.

"It's true isn't it?" he asked, reaching for me. "Your dad..."

"I..." I said, standing and backing away from him. "I can't..."

I turned to run from him, not getting very far before he grabbed my elbow and called, "Zexion!" He pulled me into him, wrapping his arms around me in a warm embrace that made me feel safe and secure. I tentatively brought my arms up to return his gesture before doing something I had never done before in my life. I began to cry in another person's presence. I couldn't help it. The tears were just... there. I couldn't have held them back if I'd wanted to. It was like everything that had happened between us up until now had been in preparation for this moment. It was weakness... I knew it was. I'd just gone down a road that I would never be able to return from. I was showing another person the deepest and most secret part of me. I was showing him my weakness.

He rubbed my head as he said, "It's going to be okay. We can do something about it. I can help you."

"Please don't tell anyone," I sobbed, my body shaking uncontrollably.

"What?" he asked, leaning away to look me in the eye.

I looked up at him, clinging to the front of his shirt as I pleaded, "If anyone finds out, he'll move us again. Please..."

"Something has to be done about it," he said. "You can't just live with it!"

"I've been living with it for seventeen years," I said darkly.

"What does he do to you?" he asked as he stroked the side of my face. "Is it... ah..."

"It's nothing sexual," I said, feeling the burning curiosity through his touch. "When I was little, all he really did was lock me in closets and leave me there. Once, he forgot about me and I was in there for two days straight."

"Oh my god," he said, holding me closer.

"It's a really long story," I said. "I'm just... a really fucked up person. I'm probably not even worth your time. You shouldn't have to waste your time on someone who's broken."

"Zexion..." he said as he lowered his head and pressed his lips against mine.

My eyes widened and my heart just about leapt out of my chest. It was a simple kiss that only lasted for a few seconds, but the true, burning emotion I felt through the intimate contact left me speechless. This had never happened to me before. I didn't know how to react.

"You're not a waste of time," he whispered, holding my head against his chest. The sound of his heartbeat calmed me down enough for me to allow myself to relax against him.

New tears were falling now. Through all the sorrow and the heartache, joy shone through like a lighthouse guiding my pleasant emotions through treacherous seas to make it safely ashore.

"I love you," he said, taking my face gently between his hands. I could barely see him through my tears as he said, "Zexion, I love you. Please, let me help you."

"I think... I love you too," I said, reaching up in an attempt to dry my eyes. It was the first time I think I've ever heard anyone say those words to me. I wanted to revel in them and never let them go. "But what would you do?" I asked, resting my head against his chest.

"I can try to get you out of there," he said as he stroked my hair. "You shouldn't have to live with that... man anymore."

"I was waiting until I turned eighteen," I said with a snuffle. "Then I'll just be able to leave. If I do anything before that, I'll go to child services and be put in foster care."

"You have to do *something*, Zexy," he said. "He could kill you."

"Very likely," I said with a sigh. "It's nothing he hasn't done before."

"What?" he asked, pulling back to search my eyes.

"He's killed me before," I said. "He's drowned me and brought me back several times before."

"I can't let this happen," he said, closing his eye. "I'll do something. I'll..."

"There's nothing we can do besides go to the police," I said. "And people have tried that before. He'll move us again as soon as he gets wind of a potential investigation. And if something miraculous happens, I'll still be put in foster care. I can just wait it out. I've only got a few months now."

"When's your birthday?" he asked, still holding me close.

"In June," I answered.

"That's more than a few months, Zexion," he said.

"Just please promise me you won't tell anyone," I said, reaching up to touch the blue pendant I wore every day. "Please."

"Okay," he whispered. "I promise. But if things get too far out of hand... If he tries to kill you again, I'm going to the police."

"Alright," I said, blinking back my tears.

"You'll tell me won't you?" he asked. "If things get out of hand, you'll tell me, right?"

"I..." I stuttered. "Yeah..."

"Promise me," he said, lifting my chin.

I was lost in his big blue eyes for a moment before answering, "I promise."

He pressed his lips to mine again before saying, "Good. I don't want to see you hurt anymore, Zexy. I love you."

"Thank you," I said, unable to hold back any more tears as I sobbed into his chest. I must have looked so foolish standing there weeping uncontrollably while he held me, but I didn't care. I'd finally told someone. I'd finally gotten this heavy burden off of my chest without any repercussions. He didn't think any differently of me now that he knew. He still... He still loved

me. It was amazing, the feeling. I was... actually loved. It was a feeling I would never forget for as long as I lived.

A/N: A moment of beauty in an otherwise cruel world. That is something to be treasured. More will be posted soon. I've started uploading every day, and since I have four stories going at once, each of them will be updated every four days. If I don't suffer a severe case of writer's block, I plan to continue this pattern. Thank you for reading. :D

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